

“MEL GIBSON’S SLAUGHTER OF CHRIST”

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Several readers of my last newsletter (No. 111) felt that my comments on Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* lacked credibility because I had not seen the movie. The criticism has some validity, though reading penetrating reviews of a book, or of any artistic production, often provide valuable insights overlooked by the casual reader or viewer. In fact, if we were to ask 100 viewers of the movie: What biblical errors and Catholic heresies did you detect in the film, chances are that 95% would reply “None.” The reason is that the average person lacks both the biblical and historical knowledge needed to evaluate its accuracy.

A proof is the comments of those who saw the movie, including Catholic and Protestant church leaders. The vast majority acclaim the movie as the most accurate reenactment of Christ’s Passion. The truth is that the movie is a gross misrepresentation of Christ’s Passion because it contains many glaring errors and the traditional Catholic view of the atonement. Gibson himself admits that his movie is largely based, not on the Gospels, but on the visions of two Roman Catholic nun-mystics, St. Anne Catherine Emmerich and Mary of Agreda. My point is that viewing a religious movie, without knowing the biblical and historical facts, can lead uninformed people to accept as fact what in reality is fiction.

To silence the criticism and to do justice to the review you are about to read, I decided to make time in my busy schedule to view the movie. Thus, on Catholic Ash Wednesday, February 25, I went to see the film at the Celebration Theater in Benton Harbor, Michigan. This was the first time in my life (66 years old) that I stepped in a movie theater. I would have preferred to rent the movie and view it in my home. This would have made it possible for me to stop the movie whenever I needed to jot down some observations. Unfortunately, at this time the movie is not available at video stores.

The best word that I can think of to describe the impact of the movie on myself is: “Shocking.” What I saw is a hundred times worse than the most negative reviews I read. From a biblical perspective, the movie con-

tains numerous glaring errors designed to promote the Catholic view of the Passion and of the redemptive role of Mary, as co-redeemer with Christ. What shocked me most is the relentless torture of Christ's body. The brutality of flogging first with switches and then with cat-o-nine-tails, blows out of proportion the physical suffering of Christ in order to promote the Catholic imitation of His suffering as a way of salvation.

The movie is truly a blood bath, where Jesus body is constantly beaten, whipped, kicked, spit on, and slapped. Christ's flesh is literally flayed with metal-tipped whips by sadistic Roman soldiers who compete among themselves for inflicting the most devastating blows. In fact, after the first flogging, Mary attempts to clean the flesh and blood lying on the pavement of Pilate's courtyard. By the time Christ reaches Golgotha, his body is so mangled, bruised, and disfigured that it looks like a sausage coming out of a meat grinder. A medical report I read suggests that Christ lost between four to five pints of blood during the torture. This means that he hardly had any blood left by the time he was crucified.

While the Romans and Jews killed Jesus once, Gibson in his movie succeeds in killing Jesus a hundred times over. In view of its sadistic content, the movie can rightly be titled: "Mel Gibson's Slaughter of Christ." No SUPER MAN could have endured the blows inflicted to Christ in the movie, including being thrown off a bridge while bound to a huge 3-inch-thick chain, strong enough to pull a train. It surprises me that Gibson never went to see the Church of St. Peter in Chains in Rome, where the alleged chains of Peter's imprisonment are displayed. Those chains are four times smaller than the ones used in the movie.

Outstanding Artistic Qualities

From a cinematographic perspective, the movie has outstanding artistic qualities. The characters look real. The Jews, the Roman soldiers, Pilate, his wife Claudia, the disciples, are all dressed in the costumes of the times. Mary looks more like a medieval nun than a first century Jewish woman. The slow motion whipping of Jesus accompanied by soft Gregorian chant stirs up deep emotional responses. Again, the slow nailing of Jesus body on the Cross, enable the viewer almost to feel the excruciating pain inflicting by each blow. The darkness and the earthquake that accompanied Christ's death are very real. The same is true of the splitting of the Temple and its

partial collapse. The visual effects reveal unsurpassed artistry. There is no question in my mind that Mel Gibson deserves an oscar, especially for the brilliant relentless brutality of the movie.

The movie raises important questions that I will attempt to address in this review. What led Gibson to produce such a bloody and gruesome Passion of Christ that blatantly misrepresents the Evangelists account of His trial and execution? Since the blood factor is minimal in the Gospel, where did Gibson get his information and inspiration? Can such a bloody, gruesome, and gory misrepresentation of Christ's suffering and death be biblically justified and shown to young people? Is it not idolatrous to portray the Divine Son of God in a way that will distort the worship experience of millions of Christians for generations to come?

Billy Graham himself acknowledges that "Every time I preach or speak about the Cross, the things I saw on the screen will be on my heart and mind" ("What Others Are Saying," <http://www.passionchrist.org>). If a preacher like Billy Graham will be permanently influenced by Gibson's distorted portrayal of Christ's Passion, will not millions of average Christians unfamiliar with the Gospels' narrative "exchange the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man" (Rom 1:23)?

The fact that some Protestant church leaders accept Gibson's Catholic view of Christ's Passion causes one to wonder: What impact will the film have on the future relationship between Catholics and Protestants? Will Protestants gradually adopt the Catholic devotion and imitation of the Passion as a way of salvation? Will Protestants unconsciously come to view Mary in the role portrayed in the film as a partner in Christ's redemption? Moreover, how will the movie affect the Christian attitude toward the Jews, in view of the fact all the Jewish people shown in the film, including the children who tried to stone Judah, are portrayed as angry, mean, and demonic? These are some of the questions that I will attempt to address in the following order:

THE SOURCES OF *THE PASSION*

SOME GLARING ERRORS OF *THE PASSION***THE PROMINENT ROLE OF MARY IN *THE PASSION*****THE RELENTLESS BRUTALITY OF *THE PASSION*****THE THEOLOGY OF *THE PASSION*****DOES *THE PASSION* OFFER A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY FOR SPREADING THE GOSPEL?****THE POTENTIAL OF *THE PASSION* FOR CATHOLIC EVANGELISM****PERMISSION TO DISTRIBUTE THIS REVIEW**

Several editors, newscasters, and church leaders contacted me to ask permission to use the preliminary review of *The Passion* that I posted in the previous newsletter. To avoid unnecessary calls or email messages, I wish to grant full permission to anyone wanting to use this review in any form needed. Be sure to inform your friends that they can receive this newsletter free of charge, simply by emailing me a message at sbacchiocchi@biblicalperspectives.com, saying: SUBSCRIBE ME.

THE SOURCES OF *THE PASSION*

The Passion of the Christ is heralded as the most authentic reenactment of the last 12 hours of Jesus' life. To add historical credibility to the movie, Gibson has the characters speak Aramaic and Latin. The Pope himself is reported to have said: "It is as it was," that is, the movie is a factual representation of the events leading to the Crucifixion. Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls confirmed the Pope's view, describing the movie as "a cinematographic transposition of the historical events of the Passion of Jesus Christ according to the Gospel." In fact, the film was shown to members of the Vatican Secretariat of State, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. All of them expressed unanimous approval, praising it as the most accurate reen-

actment of Christ's Passion ever produced. Archbishop John Foley, President of Pontifical Council for Social Communications, said: "I don't think there would be well-founded criticisms because all the material in the film comes directly from the Gospel accounts. There's nothing in the film that doesn't come from the Gospel accounts. So, if they're critical of the film, they would be critical of the Gospel."

The same view is shared by many Protestant leaders who are enthusiastically promoting the film, to use the words of Ted Haggard, the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, as "the Michelangelo of this generation." Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in southern California purchased 18,000 tickets, because he believes that the movie is: "Brilliant, biblical—a masterpiece . . . It is not just a dramatization. It's a historic description." A host of Protestant churches, including several Adventist Churches, have sponsored the film in rented theaters. At the Loma Linda University Church, Pastor Roberts and staff have rented a theater in Redlands for a showing of *The Passion* on Thursday evening before Easter. An announcement I received indicates that a special showing has been arranged for the General Conference workers.

Bill Hybels of Willow Creek, Robert Schuller of Crystal Cathedral, James Dobson of Focus on the Family, and Paul Harvey, just to name a few, are all eagerly promoting the film as an unprecedented truthful reenactment of Christ's Passion which is supposed to bring about massive conversions to Christianity.

Two Catholic Nun-mystics Inspired the Script of *The Passion*

In view of the extraordinary ecumenical endorsement and promotion of the movie as an authentic portrayal of Christ's Passion, we need to ask at the outset: Does the movie truly reflect the Biblical account of the last 12 hours of Jesus life or is it based on Catholic mystical literature? The answer is readily available, because Gibson himself openly admits that the movie is based not only on the Gospels, but also on the visions of two Catholic nun-mystics, St. Anne Catherine Emmerich and Mary of Agreda.

Referring to the visions of Emmerich, Gibson said, "She supplied me with stuff I never would have thought of" (*The New Yorker*, 9/15/03). This is evident, because, as we shall see, many of the details of the movie are foreign to the Gospels. In his review, Darrel Bock provide a handy scene-

by-scene reference guide to what is taken from the Gospels and what is derived from the mystic nuns Anne Emmerich and Mary of Agreda (www.beliefnet.com/story/140/story_14097_1.html)

Emmerich (1774-1824) was a German nun who allegedly had the stigmata or wounds of Christ in her hands. The stigmata (bleeding hands) are the ultimate proof of sainthood for Catholics, because the focus of their devotion is on imitating the suffering of Jesus. Any Catholic with the wounds of Christ in the hands becomes as it were a little christ. During the last 12 years of her life, Emmerich allegedly ate only the body and blood of Jesus as contained in the wafer of the Catholic mass. It is evident that she had serious mental problems which border on folly or dementia, yet, for Catholics they are evidence of sainthood.

Emmerich's visions on the life of Christ were published in 1824 under the title *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*. The book is advertised in a website as "filled with unusual, saintly descriptions that are not recorded in the Gospel story." Her deceptive visions describe Christ's scourging and crucifixion in the gruesome details shown in the movie—details that are absent in the Gospels. The same is true of the key role Emmerich attributes to Mary as co-Redemptor with Christ. The partnership of Mary in Christ's redemptive mission is evident in the movie, but absent in the Gospels. In her visions, she saw that Protestants suffer more than Catholics in Purgatory because no one offers masses for them or prays for them.

Gibson was also influenced by Mary of Agreda (1602-1665), a Catholic nun and visionary mystic. Her entire family entered monasteries and convents in 1618. She was often taken in trances which carried her away to teach people in foreign lands. In her book *The Mystical City of God*, Agreda offers many details about Mary and Christ's Passion, which are not in the Bible.

In spite of the groundswell Evangelical support for *The Passion of the Christ*, the movie is not Evangelical or biblical for that matter. It is a Roman Catholic movie, made by a traditional Roman Catholic director who rejects the efforts of Vatican II to update the church. He was advised by respected Roman Catholic theologians who sought approval from the Pope himself. As Gibson well puts it, "It reflects my beliefs." His beliefs are

rooted in the traditional Catholic beliefs and practices that preceded Vatican II (1962-1965).

While Vatican II offered the possibility for non-Catholics to be saved by following the lesser light God has given them, Gibson is on record in affirming that he believes that “there is no salvation for those outside the Catholic Church” (*The New Yorker*, September 15, 2003). Indeed, this has been the historical Catholic position until Vatican II: “*No salus extra ecclesia*—no salvation outside the church.” In an interview with the *Eternal Word Television Network*, Gibson said: “I don’t go to any other [Catholic] services. I go to the Old Tridentine [Latin] Rite.” To be able to practice his traditional Catholic faith, he built his own Catholic chapel, called Holy Family, near his home in California. During the filming, he attended Catholic Mass every morning with the misguided hope “to be squeaky clean.”

A major problem with the movie is Gibson’s ulterior motive to portray the Passion according to the understanding of the Old Roman Catholic Church. As Robert Tippie points out in his insightful review, “No longer is he [Gibson] attempting to take facts from the scriptures and ‘enhance’ them to get across the scriptural feelings and meanings, but he switches to old Catholic dogma that is attempting to ‘teach’ us something, rather than make us feel something from the scene. It is the latter form of poetic license that I disagree with in *The Passion*. The movie became so dogmatically heavy with Romanism that it was ridiculous. If Mel would have stuck to the striking embellishments as seen in the first scene in the Garden, the movie would have been much more impacting on me” (“*The Passion: A Review After Seeing the Movie*”).

The fact that *The Passion* is produced by a staunch, traditional Catholic who is eager to win people to his Catholic faith through his movie should be of concern to Evangelicals who wish to protect their members from Catholic heresies. It is hopelessly inconsistent for Evangelicals to endorse a movie that says and shows things that are unbiblical, while committed to uphold the integrity and authority of the Bible.

SOME GLARING ERRORS OF THE PASSION

Few viewers will note the glaring errors which are strategically located throughout the film. Most people come out of the movie thinking that they have seen an accurate portrayal of the last 12 hours of Christ’s life. The

truth is far from it. The truth and errors are so intricately interwoven that the average viewer who remembers little about the Gospels' account of the Passion may not notice the Catholic interpolations designed to promote their historical teachings on the prominent redemptive role of Mary and the brutality of Christ's suffering to satisfy divine justice and to promote the imitation of Christ's sufferings as a way of salvation. Let me mention some of the errors and inaccuracies that have caught my attention.

Gethsemane

The movie opens with Christ praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Both the garden and Jesus look awful. The garden looks like an abandoned field in southern Italy, with dry high grass and without the millenarian olive trees that are so characteristic of the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem.

Jesus looks frightening, covered with mud or grease over his hair and face. He looks as if He just came out of a mud pit, rather than from agonizing prayer. . Why should Christ look so dirty and greasy when He had just finished eating the Passover meal with His disciples? The Gospels tell that three times Jesus fell on His face and prayed to His Father if it were possible to let the cup of suffering pass from Him, but such prayer could hardly have made His clothings look so dirty. It is evident that Gibson wants to make Christ look shocking from the beginning to the end of the movie. Such pictures promotes the Catholic devotion to the Passion as a way of salvation.

As soon as the soldiers and priests capture Christ in the Garden, they bound Him with a heavy duty chain suitable for anchoring sea vessels, and start beating on Him. But in the Gospels there is no reference to the beating of Jesus in the Garden. We are simply told: "And they laid hands on him and seized him. . . . And they led Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests and elders were assembled" (Mark 14:46, 53; cf. Matt 26:50, 57). "Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest house" (Luke 22:54; cf. John 18:12-13). What in the Gospels is presented as a simple arrest and escort of Jesus to the high priest's house, in the movie becomes a plot to lynch Jesus even before he gets a chance to appear before the high priest.

While Jesus is tortured in Gethsemane, Mary awakens in her home and says: "What makes this night different from other nights?—a reference to the Jewish Passover liturgy. This detail is found in *The Dolorous Passion*, but not in the Bible.

Physical Appearance of Satan

Satan, with his black cloak and mime-white face, appears various times in the movie, inciting everyone against Christ. In the Garden a serpent crawls out Satan's nose. Slowly the serpent creeps toward Christ and is almost ready to bite His head bowed low in prayer. But Christ stands and crushes the serpent head. There is no question that Satan was hard at work in the final hours of Christ's life, hoping to defeat His redemptive mission. But there are no allusions in the Gospels regarding any physical appearances of Satan during the Passion to incite Jews and Romans against Christ. There are no satanic snakes attempting to bite Christ.

Several of the details of Satan in Gethsemane are drawn from Anne Emmerich's *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. For example, Emmerich speaks of "the serpent ...This odious reptile of gigantic size" in Gethsemane. Satan says to Jesus, "Takest thou even this sin upon thyself? Art thou willing to bear its penalty? Art thou prepared to satisfy for all these sins?" There is a striking similarity to the Script of the movie, where Satan tempts Jesus, saying: "Do you really believe one man can carry this burden? ...saving their souls is too costly."

Riot Between Jews and Romans

A frenzied riot breaks out around Jesus as he drags the Cross to Calvary. Romans and Jews fight wildly, with Christ being brutalized by all. A reviewer perceptively comments: "Wild riots happened a lot in *Mad Max* movie [by Mel Gibson], but not in the Gospels. Christ is depicted as falling at three points, but otherwise the carrying of the cross is presented as a solemn event. Here is how the Gospel writer Luke, a deeply ardent believer, presents the scene: 'As they led him away, a great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, 'daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.' This doesn't sound like the depiction of a crazy riot, nor does Christ's injunction sound like the sort of thing shouted over a melee."

It is unfortunate that Gibson is more concerned to shock people by using the typical Hollywood audiovisual portrayal of violence and bloodshed, than to capture the solemnity and dignity of the Gospel story. The fact that the episode of the riot and the ensuing beating of Jesus is foreign to the Gospels, shows again that Gibson uses the Gospels as a pretext for his violent and shocking movie. The beating of Christ is relentless throughout the movie, even while he falls under the weight of the Cross. It is evident that Gibson is determined to blow out of proportion Christ's sufferings in accordance with the Catholic devotion to the Passion.

Christ Thrown Off of a Bridge

While taking Christ to Pilate, the Pharisees throw Him off a bridge together with the huge chain and thick rope that bound him. One would expect that a hard fall from a bridge into a rocky ground below with the weight of a heavy chain, would result in broken bones and emergency assistance. But in the film, Christ is portrayed like a zombie Super Man who can withstand any fall or beating. They pull Him up with the chain bound around his waist like a sack of potatoes, and then they continue to beat Him all the way to Pilate's judgment hall. Common sense precludes the possibility of a normal human being able to walk normally after a hard fall from a bridge. But the movie shows that common sense is not so common after all.

Since there is no mention in the Gospels of Christ being thrown off a bridge by the Pharisees on the way to Pilate, where did Gibson get the information from? Most likely from Catholic mystical literature that exaggerates the physical suffering of Christ in order to promote the devotion to the Passion as a way of salvation.

Wicked Children Throw Stones to Judas

I was shocked by the totally unexpected brief episode of children playing on the street and then being suddenly transformed into demons throwing stones to Judas while he was walking outside the city to hang himself, near a decaying donkey carcass. For few second I could not understand what was happening. This episode, which is foreign to the Gospels, is found in *The Dolorous Passion*, which devotes a whole chapter on Judas' torment. The chapter describes Judas "rushing like a madman in the valley of Hinnon" and mentions carcasses.

The attempt of the children to stone Judas, reflects Gibson's intent to portray the Jews as a people, including their children, as wicked, demonic individuals responsible for the death of Jesus. Vatican II and the Pope himself have apologized for the historical Catholic position against the Jews as the murderers of Christ, but Mel Gibson does not accept the new Catholic admission. His movie show that all the Jews, including their children, are a sadistic, demonic people, guilty of Christ's death. Gibson denies this charge, but the actions of his movie speak louder than his words.

Unfair Portrayal of Jews and Romans

Throughout his movie, Gibson portrays both the Jews and the Romans as mean and sadistic, with angry looks and bad teeth. The Jewish leaders always stand in the front row of the crowd with their evil look and sinister faces. They show no compassion toward the lacerated body of Jesus made worse at every passing moment by the relentless blows. The only time they express grief is when they see their Temple collapsing as a result of the earthquake that accompanied Christ's death. This is another unbiblical and unhistorical episode, because there are no indications that the Temple collapsed at the death of Jesus.

Similarly the Roman soldiers are portrayed as sadistic and sarcastic. They joke among themselves on who can dig deeper into Christ's flesh with their metal-tipped whips. They look like hardened executioners with no empathy toward their helpless victim.

There is no question that there were sadistic and bloodthirsty Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers who played a major role in the torture and crucifixion of Jesus. But the question is: Can such a characterization be applied to all the Jews and to all the Romans? Gibson makes little effort in his movie to acknowledge the presence of Jews and Romans who believed in Christ and supported Him. Yet a balanced reading of the Gospels shows that there were both Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers who accepted Christ and were gracious toward Him.

For example, the Gospels tell us of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, both of whom were members of the Sanhedrin and secret followers of Jesus. They arranged with Pilate for taking down Jesus' body from the Cross, treating it with myrrh and aloes, and placing it in a brand new garden tomb (John 19:38-41; Luke 23:50-53; Mark 15:43-46; Matt

27:57-61). Later on Luke informs us that “the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:6). Note that not only the common Jewish people, but also “many of the priests were obedient to the faith.” In Acts 21:20, James tells Paul that “myriads of Jews have believed and they are all zealous for the law.”

On the basis of the figures provided by Acts, it is estimated that about half of the Jewish population living in Jerusalem accepted Jesus of Nazareth as their expected Messiah. Thus, it is inaccurate and misleading for Gibson to make the Jewish people as a whole guilty of Christ's death. To bring this point home, I might mention the prevailing belief among Europeans that American are obsessed with guns, which they use freely to settle disputes. They like to speak of President Bush as a Texas cowboy who wanted to take on Saddam Hussein. This stereotyped image of Americans is hardly true.

During the 30 years I have lived in the USA, I have found that the vast majority of Americans do not have guns and do not use them to settle disputes. To stereotype all Americans as gangsters, is inaccurate and offensive. The same is true of Gibson's portrayal of the Jews. To the extent that he portrays the Jews as a sadistic people, responsible for Christ's death, he perpetrates the historical Catholic anti-Jewish teachings and policies that have done incalculable damage to the cause of Christianity.

The same is true of the Roman soldiers. The Gospels tell us of a centurion who beseeched Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus acknowledged his faith and performed the miracle (Matt 8:5-8; Luke 7:2-6). Even more telling is the reaction of the centurion who most likely was in charge of the soldiers at the crucifixion of Jesus. We read: “And when the centurion, who stood facing him [Christ], saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God’” (Mark 15:39; cf. Matt 27:54). In Acts, time and again Roman soldiers delivered and protected Paul from popular lynching (Acts 21:32; 23:10; 23:27). There is ample evidence that many soldiers were decent men who accepted the Gospel. In fact, the evangelism of countries such as Great Britain is attributed to Roman soldiers stationed in that country.

It is unfortunate that Gibson makes no attempt to portray a balanced picture of the good and bad people among the Jews and Romans. Instead, he chooses to portray the Jewish people and the Roman soldiers in a negative

light. The reason is his aim to promote the historical Catholic bloody view of the Passion as well as traditional Catholic anti-Semitism. There is reason to fear that the movie, by portraying the Jewish leaders as angry, ugly, and demonic, may refuel historic anti-semitism, which many leaders have worked so hard to overcome in recent years.

The Final Earthquake

Another glaring error that caught my attention is the devastating impact of the earthquake that accompanied Christ's death. In the movie, one tear from heaven drops, a storm and earthquake breaks out, and the whole Temple is split apart in two, with sections collapsing. The source is Emmerich who says the Temple's "arch was broken. The ground was heaved up, and many other columns were thrown down in other parts of the Temple."

Again this is pure fiction, not a biblical fact. The earthquake is mentioned only in Matthew 27:51. Luke speaks of the darkness that encompassed the land from noon to 3:00 p.m. There is no mention of the Temple sustaining any damage from the earthquake. The only thing that happened inside the Temple was the splitting of the curtain that divided the Holy Place from the Most Holy. "And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split" (Matt 27:51).

Had the Temple been split into two parts at Christ's crucifixion, there would be historical accounts of its reconstruction as happened in A. D. 70 when the Romans destroyed the Temple. But there are no indications that the Temple was repaired or rebuilt because of the earthquake that occurred at the Crucifixion. Gibson ignores biblical and historical facts, because for him fiction offers more shocking images than facts.

The Carrying of the Cross

In the movie Jesus falls three times under the weight of the Cross, in accordance with the Catholic tradition of the 14 Stations of the Cross. The Gospels do not explicitly mention falls. Again, the Gospels do not say that Mary and company followed Jesus in the crowd, but the movie describes Mary following Jesus. In a flashback, Mary rescues a falling Jesus as a child. Alluding to Revelation 21:5, Jesus says to Mary: "See, I make all

things new.” The source is Emmerich’s *The Dolorous Passion* and Mary of Agreda’s *City of God*, where Mary accompanies her son throughout His journey to Calvary. According to Emmerich, when Jesus fell, Mary sprang “from the doorway into the midst of the group who were insulting and abusing him . . . she threw herself on her knees by his side and embraced him.”

In the movie, but not in the Bible, a Jewish girl helps Jesus wipe his face. The source is *The Dolorous Passion* where Veronica held the cloth while Jesus wiped His face. Veronica “made her way through the mob, . . . reached Jesus, fell on her knees before Him, and presented the veil, saying at the same time, ‘Permit me to wipe the face of my Lord.’ Jesus took the veil in His left hand, wiped His bleeding face, and returned it with thanks.”

The episode of the carrying of the Cross contains a glaring error, because Gibson has both Simon of Cyrene and Jesus carrying the cross together. I could not believe what I saw because this openly contradicts the Gospels account which reads: “And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus” (Luke 23:26; cf. Mark 15:21; Matt 27:32).

In the Gospels, it is clear that Simon carries the Cross for Jesus by himself, while following Jesus who by now was totally exhausted. One wonders, Why does Gibson misrepresents the Gospel story by having both Jesus and Simon carry the Cross together? Most likely to suit his purpose to intensify the suffering of Jesus in order to promote more effectively the brutality of Christ’s suffering in order to satisfy the demands of divine justice. (Satisfaction view of the atonement). Had Christ been relieved altogether from carrying the Cross, then His sufferings would have been reduced. This would run contrary to the Catholic satisfaction view of the atonement and to Gibson’s strategy to shock people by making the agony of Christ stretch beyond the limits of human imagination.

It was shocking for me to see people beating on Christ, not only while carrying the Cross, but also while collapsed under its weight. It is hard to believe that people can be so sadistic by relentlessly beating on a bloody victim fallen under the weight of a heavy Cross. But for Gibson, religious and commercial considerations demand that the beating of Christ must go on non-stop, even when fallen under the weight of the Cross.

Religiously, the Catholic devotion to the Passion entails that Christ's sufferings must surpass human limitations in order to meet the demands of divine justice. In other words, expiation for our sins is through the intensity of Christ's suffering, rather than through His death as a sacrifice for our sins. Commercially, relentless brutality sells movies. Gibson knows it too well. His earlier best selling movies *The Patriot* and *Braveheart* are described by *New York Times* as "two of the most gory and violent artistic works of the modern era."

THE PROMINENT ROLE OF MARY IN *THE PASSION*

The most glaring heresy of *The Passion* is the prominent role that Mary plays throughout the film as a partner with Christ in the redemption of mankind. She lends vital support to her Son throughout the whole ordeal. In accordance with Catholic belief, had she been absent, Christ would not have been able to offer Himself as the sacrifice for mankind. This heresy is taught especially by Ann Catherine Emmerich who presents Mary as co-redemptrix, that is, co-redeemer. At the time of the crucifixion, Mary actually utters the words: "Let me die with you."

While in the Gospels' narrative of the Passion, Mary appears only once in the Gospel of John, when Jesus on the Cross pointing to John says to His mother: "Woman, behold your son!" (John 19:26), in the movie Mary is present in all the major episodes. She is dressed like a Medieval nun, rather than a first-century Jewish woman. She is present in the Garden to comfort her Son. She meets Peter on the streets after his denial of Christ. Peter in distress looks Mary in the face and falls on his knees, calling Mary "Mother." He confesses his sin to Mary and asks for her forgiveness. Mary is ready to absolve Peter for his sin, but he jumps up and says, "No, I am not worthy." The source is *The Dolorous Passion* where Peter after his denial, rushes out to Mary, exclaiming in a dejected tone: "O, Mother, speak not to me—thy Son is suffering more than words can express: speak not to me! They have condemned Him to death, and I have denied him three times." The Catholic intercessory role of Mary is loud and clear.

Mary and Claudia

In the movie, but not in the Bible, during the scourging Mary says to Jesus: "My son, when, where, how will you choose to be delivered of this?" Pilate's wife, Claudia, gives Mary and Mary Magdalene fine cloths which

they later use to mop up Jesus' blood. The source is *The Dolorous Passion* which mentions that Claudia gave linen cloths to Mary: "I saw Claudia Procles, the wife of Pilate, send some large pieces of linen to the Mother of God. I know not whether she thought that Jesus would be set free, and that his Mother would then require linen to dress his wounds, or whether this compassionate lady was aware of the use which would be made of her present. ...I soon after saw Mary and Magdalen approach the pillar where Jesus had been scourged; ...they knelt down on the ground near the pillar, and wiped up the sacred blood with the linen which Claudia Procles had sent." This scene is vividly portrayed in the movie, but is not found in the Bible. Incidentally, during the Middle Ages, the cloths stained with Jesus' blood became holy relics for Catholics.

Mary appeals to Pilate's wife, Claudia, urging her to pressure the Roman soldiers to protect her son against the angry Jewish crowd. Claudia aligns herself with Mary by influencing her husband on behalf of Christ. But Pilate's efforts are too little and too late. Again, the interaction between Mary and Claudia is foreign to the Bible, deriving instead from *The Dolorous Passion*.

Another incident portrayed in the movie, but not found in the Bible, is Mary's reaction to Jesus' punishment. She kisses the stone floor above the place where Jesus was bound in chains. The source is not the Bible, but *The Dolorous Passion* which says: "The Blessed Virgin ...begged to be taken to some place as near as possible to her Divine Son. John, therefore, led her and the holy women to the front of the prison where Jesus was confined. Mary was with Jesus in spirit, and Jesus was with her; but this loving Mother wished to hear with her own ears the voice of her Divine Son. She listened and heard not only his moans, but also the abusive language of those around him."

Christ's journey along the *Via Dolorosa* on the way to Golgotha is inspired not by the Gospels, but by the medieval Catholic devotional ritual, known as the 14 "Stations of the Cross." During this journey, Christ stops several times because he has no strength left to go on. At those points, Mary is always near Christ and acts as His comforter and coach. Through their eye contact, Mary infuses mystical power on her Son.

The notion of Mary participating with Christ in our redemption is a long-standing Catholic heresy that Protestants have strongly rejected. But, I

dare to predict that the subtle and deceptive role of Mary in the movie will influence many uninformed Evangelicals to embrace her as their co-redeemer. This deception is fostered by the powerful role Mary plays in the movie, especially in the last scenes.

Mary and Jesus at the Cross

When Jesus hangs on the Cross with His lacerated body covered with blood, Mary embraces His bloody feet and her face is splattered with blood. What a powerful Catholic message in showing not only Jesus bleeding on the Cross, but also Mary standing besides Him, covered with His blood! The message is clear: both of them have paid the price of our redemption.

In the movie, but not in the Bible, Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene, and John take Jesus' body down from the Cross. Even more telling is the picture of Mary cradling the bloody body of Jesus in the same position as Michelangelo's Pietà, when the Roman centurion took the body down from the Cross. That picture has a powerful message. It shows not only the importance of Christ's death, but also the sacrifice of Mary in offering her Son for our salvation.

In an interview with Zenit, the Roman Catholic News Service, Thomas Rosica, the Catholic priest who oversaw World Youth Day 2002 and its *Way of the Cross* through the streets of Toronto, acknowledges how *The Passion of the Christ* highlights the role of Mary: "One scene, in particular, was very moving. As Jesus falls on the Way of the Cross, there is a flashback to his falling on a Jerusalem street as a child, and his mother running out of the house to pick him up. The interplay of Mary and Jesus in this film is moving, and reaches its apex in the scene of the Pietà. The Mother of the Lord is inviting each of us to share her grief and behold her Son." (Father Thomas Rosica on Mel Gibson's "The Passion," National Director of World Youth Day 2002 Weighs in on Film, 2004-02-06).

Unbiblical Role of Mary

The exaggerated role of Mary in the movie is totally unbiblical. Contrary to Catholic fiction, what is conspicuous in the Gospels' account of the Passion, is the absence of Mary. She appears only once at the Cross when Christ entrusts her to the care of John, saying: "Woman, behold your

son!” (John 19:26). Such an impersonal address hardly supports the interaction between Jesus and Mary present throughout the movie.

The Gospels clearly and plainly tell us that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took down the body of Jesus from the Cross and “bound it in linen cloths with spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews” (John 19:40). There is no allusion to Mary or the other devout women handling the body of Jesus. The exalted role of Mary in *the Passion* is a pure fabrication of Catholic teachings designed to exalt the intercessory role of Mary at the expense of the centrality of Christ’s atoning sacrifice.

The danger is that both believers and unbelievers are accepting Gibson’s fictitious and heretical reenactment of *The Passion*, as the authentic biblical teaching. It is a fact that Americans talk far more about what they have seen in the movies than in what they have read in their Bible. A religious movie like *The Passion* will soon become for many Americans their Bible. A lady wrote in an email that she was grateful for understanding now the “facts” of the Passion missed by the Gospels. She felt that the Gospels’ account were too shallow and was glad that Catholic visionaries were finally presenting the “whole truth” of the Passion.

The danger of exchanging Bible truths for movie fiction is highlighted by a reviewer, who says: “Because of Gibson’s Roman Catholic background, Mary has a major role in the film. Gibson puts Mary at nearly all of the events of his trial, torture and crucifixion, and even has Mary kissing Jesus feet when he is on the cross. There are many scenes like that one—not Biblical, but based upon mystic and apocryphal writings and Roman Catholic tradition. I took notes of the non-Biblical scenes, events and characters and had a full page of them. The danger is that this film will become the Oliver Stone’s *JFK* of the crucifixion—that is, the public will only ‘know’ the crucifixion story as it is depicted here with all the non-Biblical material assumed to be Biblical or historical. This is the only way, I’m told, that many now ‘know’ the details of the assassination of John F. Kennedy—through Oliver Stone’s fictional film.”

THE RELENTLESS BRUTALITY OF THE PASSION

What shocked me most is the relentless brutality of the torture inflicted on Christ’s body throughout the movie. The brutality is designed, not to inspire, but to leave people shocked and emotionally drained. Gibson

achieves this objective with unsurpassed artistry and deserved my personal Oscar for brilliant brutality.

The frightening brutality of the whipping of Jesus, first with a stick and then with a cat-o'-nine-tails that has metal barbs, is inspired not by Gospels' account of the flogging, but by Emmerich's *Dolorous Passion* and Mary of Agreda's *City of God*. These mystical books describe Jesus' flogging in vivid and excruciating details. Emmerich saw Jesus' body "entirely covered with black, blue, and red marks; the blood was trickling down on the ground ...they made use of a different kind of rod,—a species of thorny stick, covered with knots and splinters. These barbarians ... untied Jesus, and again fastened him up with his back turned towards the pillar. ... they recommenced scourging him with even greater fury than before ... The body of our Lord was perfectly torn to shreds." Gibson follows the details of this gruesome description by having Jesus flogged twice, in the front and back, first with a stick and then with a a cat-o'-nine-tails.

Apparently it was not difficult for Gibson to brutalize Jesus' body, because he is skilled at depicting violence. Being unfamiliar with his films (my time is too valuable to be wasted watching fiction), I cannot speak first-hand. But critics point out this fact in their reviews. For example, *Newsday* says that "the film shows that the *Braveheart* star and director is skilled at depicting violence . . . with grisly, horrific details of Christ's physical mutilation and torment."

Referring to the bloodiness of *The Passion*, Eugene Habecker, President of the American Bible Society, said: "It's Mel Gibson. If you watch *Braveheart*, that's Mel Gibson." Jeff Strickler writes in *Star Tribune*: "As much as 'The Passion of the Christ' has been ballyhooed as a religious film, it is, above all, a Mel Gibson movie. Sure, the Oscar-winning director of *Braveheart* slips in a little dogma [much in my view], but what he really lays on your face is brutality. Blood splatters. Skin rips open. Eyes swell shut. Gibson's thesis is that Jesus suffered for people's sins, and his focus is on the suffering.

"The relentless brutality is likely to put off many viewers, but it also gives the film a haunting power. The images are difficult to get out of your mind. You will leave the theater feeling emotionally exhausted and probably will spend the next few hours processing what you've witnessed" (*Star Tribune*, February 25, 2004). Indeed, I spent the night wondering how any

sane person could produce such a gory, gruesome, and bloody exaggeration of Christ's Passion. I could not help but question Gibson's mental sanity.

Relentless Brutality of the Movie

In his review published in the *Tri-City Herald*, Christy Lemire writes: "The film is frightening—not for its dogma [in my view the dogma is equally frightening], but for the relentlessness of its brutality. Gibson, as director, producer and co-writer, is fetishistic in his depiction of the pain Jesus suffered during the last 12 hours of his life. The beating and whipping and ripping of skin become so repetitive, they'll leave the audience emotionally drained and stunned. . . . Roman soldiers, speaking Latin, strip him down to practically nothing, chain him to a rock and scourge him until he collapses in a bloody heap of shredded flesh" (*Tri-City Herald*, February 24, 2004).

Lemire continues noting that "the idea that children should see *The Passion* as a learning device—that churches are organizing screenings and theater trips for their parishioners and catechism classes—is truly shocking. Grown-ups—even true believers—will have difficulty sitting through the film. Just think of the trauma it will inflict on kids." Shocking as it may sound, this is exactly what some preachers, parents, and teachers are doing, without considering the emotional and spiritual trauma the film will cause on young minds.

In the review published in the *New Yorker*, David Denby calls *The Passion* "a sickening death trip, a grimly unilluminating procession of treachery, beatings, blood and agony . . . How will parents deal with the pain, terror and anger that children will doubtless feel as they watch a man flayed and pierced until dead?"

On a similar vein, Ty Burr writes in the *Boston Globe*: "A profoundly medieval movie, Yes. Brutal almost beyond powers of description, Yes. More obsessed with capturing every holy drop of martyr's blood and sacred goblet of flesh than with any message of Christian love, Yes. More than anything, *The Passion of the Christ* seems to be exactly the movie Mel Gibson wanted to make as an abiding profession of his traditionalist Catholic faith. On that score it is a success" (February 24-2004). I fully agree with Burr. Gibson has done a masterful job in producing a brutal and gory reenactment of Christ's Passion in full accordance with his traditional Catholic faith.

Burr describes in a vivid way what is perhaps the most gruesome scene of *The Passion*: “In the film’s present-tense scenes, Christ has already had his face smashed in, but that’s just an entr’acte [interval, introduction]. Now he is tied to a post in a Roman courtyard, and the camera lovingly pans the tray of instruments: the scourge, the spikes. There follows a 10-minute sequence in which, first, the Savior is whipped with a stick until his back is raw. Then he is whipped with a cat-o’-nine-tails that has metal barbs at the end of each tether; in one shot we see the hooks dig deep and tear out his flesh. Then Christ is rolled over and he is flayed from the front. Later, after the long march to Golgotha, he is nailed to the cross in slo-mo close-ups in which each hammer stroke brings forth a fresh gout of blood. . . . To Gibson, each drop is holy, so the more of it the better. Each chunk of flesh dug out by the lash is Christ’s sacrifice in all its beauty, so bring it on. The cumulative effect, however, brings only numbness” (*Globe*, February 24, 2004).

In his editorial on *ADVENTIST REVIEW*, William Johnsson gives as his first reason for choosing not to view *THE PASSION*, its “jarring violence.” He writes: “I have not seen the movie. I don’t criticize anyone who has, but I don’t intend to see it. Here’s why. From all accounts the movie is jarringly graphic. Mel Gibson has starred in violent movies: now he has made the ultimate violent movie. The *Newsweek* article calls the violence in the R-rated movie ‘at first shocking, then numbing.’ I abhor violence and cannot stand to watch scenes of violence. I don’t need to see this movie.”

Should Young People See The Passion?

Johnsson’s reason for choosing not to view the movie, raises the question: Should parents or teachers take young people to see this shocking, frightening movie? The answer is obvious. It is irresponsible to expose Adventist young people to scenes of brutal violence. The same view was expressed to me privately by two Seminary professors who have been asked to critique the movie. In his review of the movie in the Boston *Globe*, Ty Burroffers an unequivocal answer: “Any parent—no matter how devout and well-intentioned—who takes a child to this movie is guilty of abuse. Period.” I fully concur with Burr’s verdict and I would add that even adults who are emotionally weak should not see the movie.

Several reports indicate that some viewers were hospitalized after viewing the film. For example, Peggy Law Scott, a 57-years old woman in Wichita, Kansas, collapsed during the film’s final, bloody crucifixion scene.

While people were helping the woman, the lights were turned on and the people were ushered out. She later died at a hospital.

In view of its brutality and devastating effects on viewers, it came as a surprise to learn that some Adventist churches and schools are promoting the film, even among young people. A professional Adventist lady emailed me this message: "I was especially interested in your comments on the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. I will not see this movie, but I have a 16-year-old daughter who attends Loma Linda Academy. Her Bible teacher has offered extra credit to anyone in his class who sees the movie. He himself took a carload of students to see it this week. My daughter listened to him and has expressed an interest in seeing the movie with her class. I had her go back and read the accounts of Jesus' death in the four gospels and now I am having her read your newsletter as well. I think she will see things in a different light. I am also forwarding your newsletter to both the Bible teacher and the principal of Loma Linda Academy."

Besides the shocking brutality, there is another important reason for Adventists to choose not to view *THE PASSION*, namely, the fact that the movie impersonates Christ, especially His suffering and atoning death for our redemption. Historically Adventist have recognized that any movie impersonating Christ should not be view by an Adventist. This recommendation is given by the Youth Department of the General Conference. Under the heading of "Recreation and Amusements," the Your Department offers guidelines for "acceptable" and "unacceptable" movies. The first guideline for "Unacceptable Presentations" is "Motion pictures impersonating Christ" (*Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, p. 1187). No reasons are given for such guideline, most likely because Adventists have historically understood that playing the role of a divine Being is biblically and ethically wrong. This point will be discussed shortly.

How can some Adventist preachers and teachers promote a movie that impersonates Christ, contains glaring errors, is full of relentless brutality, and promotes Catholic heresies such as the prominent role of Mary in our redemption? I can think of two possible answers. First, some of them have not seen the movie and thus they base their promotion on the glowing reports they have heard or read. One pastor, who arranged for his congregation and community to view *The Passion* at a local theater, told me in a telephone conversation that he never thought the movie would be so bad.

Had he seen the movie beforehand, he would not have organized the private screening.

Will the Shocking Brutality of *The Passion* Lead People to Christ?

Second, some pastors, teachers, and parents believe that shocking violence, vivid gore, and repulsive brutality can be legitimately used to help people see how much Christ suffered for them. Bob Lepine of Family Life makes this point saying: “*The Passion* may be Gibson’s most violent film to date, and it deserves its R rating. On more than one occasion as I watched this movie, I had to turn away from the screen. I remember thinking at one point, ‘Enough. This is over the top.’ And almost immediately I had a second thought. ‘That’s right,’ I thought. ‘This is over the top, because the death of Christ was, in reality, barbaric and violent.’ Maybe what we all need to see is not a cleaned up, sanitized Hollywood version of His death, but a *more accurate* and graphic look at how He suffered for us. (February, 2004 website article; emphasis added).

Does Gibson’s shocking brutality of Christ’s suffering and death provide “a more accurate” and effective portrayal of the Passion than the one we find in the Gospels? Is such a shocking portrayal needed to convert people today? Lepine and others like him, seem to forget that the Gospels were written at a time when dramatic plays with shocking brutality were the order of the day. We are told that when the Colosseum was inaugurated in Rome (about A. D. 80), 9000 beasts and 3000 gladiators lost their lives during the first 100 days to give a continuous bloody spectacle to the Romans.

Shocking brutality was the hallmark of the Broadway Shows of ancient Rome. Certainly God knows how powerful and effective it would have been to spread the Gospel through graphic descriptions and dramatization of the events leading to the Crucifixion. We would think that Passion Plays presented in the amphitheaters scattered throughout all the major cities of the Roman world could have led many Gentiles to accept Christ as their personal Savior.

Is the Gospel to be Proclaimed Through Drama?

But God chose to proclaim the Good News of salvation, not through drama, but through the foolishness of preaching (Cor 1:21). He chose to include in the Gospels, not graphic, gory details of Christ’s trial and cruci-

fixion, but a sober account of how He nobly offered Himself up as a sacrifice for our salvation. The reason is that faith comes, not by seeing drama, but “by *hearing*, and *hearing by the word of God*” (Rom 10:17). Tom Holts perceptively observes that “Man can use shock and violence to evoke extreme empathy and emotion and bind viewers together in a ‘shared experience’ of grief, horror, and outrage, but this is not God’s pathway to saving faith revealed in the New Testament, nor is it a means to greater devotion and intimacy with God among God’s people” (Bible Discernment Ministries 2/2004).

Evangelical leaders supporting Gibson believe that his brutal reenactment of the Passion is *true to the Gospels* and will lead many people in our generation to accept Christ as their personal Savior. In an interview with the *New Yorker* magazine, Gibson said: “*I wanted to be true to the Gospels. That has never been done before. I didn’t want to see Jesus looking really pretty. I wanted to mess-up one of his eyes, destroy it*” (September, 2003).

Is this what being true to the Gospels means to Gibson? Does any of the Gospels portray Christ with a “destroyed eye” and with his body skinned alive as shown in *The Passion*? The biblical accounts of Jesus’ flogging and crucifixion are as minimal as they could be. The Synoptic Gospels tell us essentially the same thing: “Having scourged Jesus, [Pilate] delivered him to be crucified,” . . . “And when they came to a place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him” (see Matt 27:26, 33; Mark 15:20, 22; Luke 23:25, 33). A few verses later, Jesus is dead. This is the brief, sober, and cryptic account of Jesus’ sufferings and death.

The Gospel writers do not linger over the details of Christ’s suffering to stir emotions and promote the Catholic view of the atonement and the imitation of His Passion as a way of salvation. The Evangelists were not mentally unbalanced Catholic mystics obsessed with intensifying Christ’s suffering and imitating them as a way of salvation, but practically minded men who learned at Jesus’ feet how to imitate the beauty of His character in their daily life. They report Jesus’ suffering in the briefest terms, because they understood that what is important for our salvation is not the intensity of Christ’s SUFFERING, but the fact that JESUS offered Himself as an atoning sacrifice for our redemption. The notion that Christ had to be beaten up to a bloody pulp to satisfy the demands of God’s justice, is found in *The Dolorous Passion*, but not in the Bible. John Dominic Crossan confesses, that “If I accepted Gibson’s vision of this savage God, I hope I would have

the courage to follow Mrs. Job's advice: 'Curse God, and die' (Job 2:9; "Hymn to a Savage God").

Meditation on the Humility and Nobility of Christ's Character

Nowhere the New Testament suggests that we should meditate on the gory details of Christ's flogging and the brutal treatment he received along the 14 stations leading to Calvary. The reason is that, contrary to Catholic teachings, we are saved, not by imitating in a small scale the suffering that Christ experienced on a larger scale, but by accepting His gracious provision for our salvation through His atoning sacrifice.

The New Testament invites us to focus on Christ's life of obedience, His atoning death, His glorious Resurrection, His constant intercession, His victorious Return as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In the classic text of Philippians 2:5-9, Paul exhorts the believers to focus, not on the gory details of Christ's suffering, but on the totality of His redemptive mission: incarnation, humiliation, suffering, and glorification.

"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, thou he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name" (Phil 2:5-9).

Paul knew what sufferings was all about because he was flogged five times, beaten with rods three times, stoned once, shipwrecked three times, etc. (2 Cor 11:24-29), yet he lifts up for the Christian meditation, not the gory details of Christ's torture and execution, but the nobility of Christ's character as revealed in His incarnation, humiliation, suffering, and subsequent exaltation. These are the themes that can fire our imagination, without having to refer to graphic and gory details of His suffering.

Along the same lines, Ellen White counsels us "to spend a thoughtful hour each day in contemplation of the life of Christ. We should take it point by point, and let the imagination grasp each scene, especially the closing ones. As we thus dwell upon His great sacrifice for us, our confidence in Him will be more constant, our love will be quickened, and we shall be more

deeply imbued with His Spirit. . . . Beholding the beauty of His character, we shall be 'changed into the same image from glory to glory' (2 Cor 3:18)" (*Desires of Ages*, p. 83). Note that Ellen White admonishes us to contemplate, not the gory details of Christ's death, but the beauty of Christ's character as revealed especially in His great sacrifice for us.

THE THEOLOGY OF THE PASSION

The average viewer of *The Passion* may not realize that the movie is not a mere reenactment of the last 12 hours of Christ's death, but a powerful promotion of the focal point of Catholic worship: THE MASS. Catholics go to church, not to hear the proclamation of the Word of God, but to witness the reenactment of Christ's sacrifice. The short homily that priests deliver after the Mass, has been largely influenced by Protestant preaching. The few Masses that I attended as a boy growing up in Rome, Italy, and later as a doctoral student at the Pontifical Gregorian University usually had no homilies. At the Mass, Catholic believers watch the priest reenact Christ's sacrifice, just like moviegoers watch it in Gibson's *Passion*.

Why is Christ's sacrifice repeated at the Mass? Because the Catholic believes that every time Christ is offered at the altar, the benefits of His sacrifice are renewed to the believer. Such benefits can be applied not only to living believers but also to the souls of loved ones in Purgatory. I vividly recall the visit of priests or nuns to our home in Rome, to invite us to pay for perpetual Masses on behalf of our loved ones in Purgatory. Such Masses are supposed to reduce the time of suffering in Purgatory and hasten their transition to Paradise.

The Catholic view of the Mass as a reenactment of Christ's sacrifice as a way of salvation, helps us understand why Gibson, a very devout Catholic, has invested 25 millions dollars to produce *The Passion*. His movie is designed to help modern audiences understand, as Gibson stated in an interview with the Eternal Word Television Network, "the juxtaposition between the sacrifice of the cross and the sacrifice of the altar [Mass]—which is the same thing."

Gibson's *Passion* and the Catholic Mass

Gibson's movie is a large scale reenactment of the Passion that takes place in a small scale at every celebration of the Mass. At the Mass, Catho-

lics look for Christ, not in heaven above, but in the ostensorium, that is, the box containing the host that is elevated during the Mass for the consecration of the host. In a similar fashion, at the movie theater, people will see Christ, not in heaven above, but in a bloody reenactment of His Passion.

The script of *The Passion of the Christ* was specifically written to highlight the link between Christ's suffering and death on the Cross, and the reenactment of His sacrifice at the altar during the Mass celebration. Gibson's intent is to show that the sacrifice of the Cross and the sacrifice at the altar (Mass) are the same thing.

The Catholic belief that Christ can be sacrificed time and again and each time benefits accrue from His fresh atonement, is openly contradicted by Scripture. Hebrews teaches that Christ, our High Priest, does not need to repeat His sacrifice, because "he did this once for all when he offered up himself" (Heb 7:27). Protestants have historically rejected as "abominable" the idea that the priest at the altar has the power to sacrifice Christ again and again. But the widespread acceptance of *The Passion* by Evangelical Christians is a clear indication that the gulf between Catholicism and Protestantism is being bridged, at the expense of the latter.

The Gulf is Being Bridged

In his review of *The Passion*, Andrews J. Webb perceptively observes that "Gibson's comment about the sacrifice of the altar and the sacrifice of the cross shows the indispensable link in this movie between the Catholic view of Christ's sacrifice and the portrayal of the Crucifixion in *The Passion of the Christ*. The fact that Evangelicals have uncritically endorsed it speaks volumes about how far the Evangelical Protestant understanding of Christ's death and the related subject of Justification have slipped since the Reformation. In Roman Catholic theology, the intense physical suffering of Christ's Crucifixion is the focus along with the emphasis on physical sacrifice. This is one of the reasons why in Roman Catholic iconography we have so much imagery related to Christ's physical pain and that crucifixes show him still suffering on the cross. This emphasis on Christ's physical agony is repeated in Roman Catholic devotional material, prayers, and, of course, in *The Passion of the Christ*. The theology of the Bible, however, points out to us that the grand importance of Christ's crucifixion lay not in the unusual intensity His physical suffering, but in His once for all propitiation of God's wrath for our sins (1 John 4:10).

By focusing exclusively on the brutality of Christ's physical sufferings, Gibson ignores the far greater pain of the mental anguish experienced by Christ for having the sins of the world placed upon Him. Even the worst physical torments inflicted upon Christ by Jews and Romans did not compare with the anguish of feeling separated from God while dying to pay the full penalty of our sins. Satisfying Roman justice on a cross was comparatively easy, as thousands of men and women, including some of the Apostles, did that. But it was far more difficult to satisfy the justice of God by offering Himself as a perfect sacrifice for our salvation.

Christ the Survivor

The fundamental importance of Christ's Resurrection for the Christian faith is largely ignored in *The Passion*. At the end of the movie, Christ is seen in profile for a few seconds when the stone of the tomb is rolled back. Gibson minimizes the Resurrection because the focus of the movie is on Christ's capacity to survive the most brutal torture. He can take it all, and we can become survivors like Him.

In his review published in the *Boston Globe*, James Carroll notes: "There is no resurrection in this film. A stone is rolled back, a zombie-Jesus is seen in profile for a second or two, and that's it. But there is a reason for this. In Gibson's theology, the resurrection has been rendered unnecessary by the infinite capacity of Jesus to withstand pain. Not the Risen Jesus, but the Survivor Jesus. Gibson's violence fantasies, as ingenious as perverse, are, at bottom, a fantasy of infinite male toughness" (*Globe*, February 24, 2004).

The biblical Christ is not an invincible Super Man, but the Divine Son of God, who took upon Himself our human limitations and was "made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people" (Heb 2:17).

IS IT BIBLICALLY CORRECT TO IMPERSONATE CHRIST?

Is it biblically correct for a movie artist to impersonate and dramatize the last twelve hours of Christ's suffering, by portraying His body splattered with blood on the way to Calvary? Can such dramatization be biblically justified? Or does it represent a sacrilegious act condemned by the Second

Commandment and by the biblical respect for the Holiness of God?

The question of the biblical and ethical legitimacy of dramatizing in a movie the final hours of Christ's agony and death, is never addressed in the reviews that I have read. The comments of movie critics and church leaders who have previewed the film, focus primarily on the artistic qualities and historical accuracy of the film. The problem is that a film about Christ's agony and death, may be artistically brilliant, but biblically flawed, because any attempt to impersonate the Divine Son of God, reducing Him to a mere mortal human being, cannot be biblically justified.

There are no Passion Plays in the Bible. The only drama resembling a Passion Play was the sacrificial system. Note that the animals offered of Christ's sacrifice were not brutalized as they were led to be slaughter. In the Old Testament God manifested His glory, not His face. On Mount Sinai God's face was hidden by a cloud. In the sanctuary His presence was manifested as the shekinah glory between the cherubins, but there was no visual portrayal of God. Respect for the holiness of God precluded any attempt to represent the divine Beings of the Godhead. Even sacred object like that the ark of the covenant found in the Most Holy Place (symbol of God's throne), could not be touched or looked inside by ordinary people.

We read in 1 Samuel 6:19 that God slew 70 men of Beth-shemesh because they dared to look into the ark of the Lord: "And he slew some of the men of Beth-shemesh, because they looked into the ark of the Lord; he slew seventy men of them. . . . Then the men of Beth-shemesh said: 'Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?'" (1 Sam 6:19-20). Later on when the ark was carried on a new cart to Jerusalem "Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there because he put forth his hand to the ark; and he died there besides the ark of God" (2 Sam 6:6-7).

These tragic episodes teach us an important lesson. No human being can afford to treat lightly what is associated with God. The ark was the place where God manifested His presence (Shekinah). Thus, to play with it or to treat it casually, was sacrilegious. God's people understood this important truth. This explains why there were no pictures of the Godhead in the Temple, Synagogue, or Early Christian Churches.

In the catacombs Christ is represented not by pictures, but by symbols like the fish, the anchor, or the Good Shepherd. The reason is that early Christians understood that no human being can bring God down to the human level without violating His transcendent majesty and purity. This is a simple biblical truth, which many today find difficult to accept. **PLAYING GOD OR WITH GOD IS SACRILEGIOUS.** God is not a consumer product for our society to use and to profit from. It is estimated that *The Passion* make more money than any previous film, having raked in over 250 million dollars in the first two weeks. It is hard to comprehend how a brutal reenactment of Christ's suffering can be exploited to make millions of dollars.

Any attempt by an actor to act out Christ's suffering and death, may ultimately lead many simple minded believers to a veneration of the movie-Christ they have seen, rather than of the biblical Christ they have not seen. The temptation to worship a visible and objective Christ can be seen in dominant Catholic countries, where the only Christ devout Catholics know and worship is the One they touch, see, and often wear as jewelry. Statues, crucifixes and pictures of the bleeding Savior, abound in devout Catholic homes. Instead of worshipping the invisible Lord in Spirit and Truth, they worship an idol that they can see, touch and feel.

God's Precaution to Prevent Objectification of Christ

We can hardly blame God for the attempts to objectify the three members of the Godhead through movies, statues, painting, statuettes, and religious jewelry. The Lord took utmost precaution to prevent human beings from materializing and objectifying His spiritual nature. This is evidenced, for example, by the fact that when the second Person of the Godhead became a Human Being for about thirty-three years, He refrained from leaving a single material mark that can be authenticated as His own. Christ did not build or own a house; He did not write books or own a library; He did not leave the exact date of His birth or of His death; He did not leave descendants. He left an empty tomb, but even this place is still disputed. He left no "thing" of Himself, but only the assurance of His spiritual presence: "Lo, I am with you 'always, to the close of the age'" (Matt. 28 :20).

Why did Christ pass through this world in this mysterious fashion, leaving no physical footprints or material traces of Himself? Why did the Godhead miss the golden opportunity provided by the incarnation to leave a permanent material evidence and reminder of the Savior's look, life, suffering,

and death on this planet? Why do the Gospel writers minimize the suffering of Christ's final hours? Why is the "blood" factor, which is so prominent in Gibson's "Passion," largely missing in the narrative of the Passion? Is this not clear evidence of God's concern to protect mankind from the constant temptation of reducing a spiritual relationship into a "thing-worship"?

It was because of this same concern that God chose the Sabbath—a day rather than an object—as the symbol of a divine-human belonging relationship. Being time, a mystery that defies human attempts to define it, the Sabbath provides a constant protection against the worship of objects and a fitting reminder of the spiritual nature of the covenant relationship between God and His people. If Gibson was to accept the message of the Sabbath regarding the spiritual nature of God, he might consider withdrawing the film before its release. Such a courageous decision would prevent the adoption by million of Christians of a distorted view of Christ's suffering and death—a view that, as we shall shortly show, is conditioned by the Catholic teachings regarding the imitation of Christ's Passion, rather than by the biblical account of Golgotha.

No Drama, Passion Plays, or Pictures in the Early Church

During the first four centuries, Christians did not use pictures of Jesus or Passion Plays for their evangelistic outreach, despite the fact that they lived in highly visual cultures. Pagan temples were littered with statues of gods. Mystery religions like Mithraism, Cybele, and Isis had their own Passion Play. A popular one was known as the taurobolium (blood-bath)—that is, the imitation of the death and resurrection of the god Attis by killing a bull and covering a new believer with his blood.

God's people did not adopt pagan religious visual practices for communicating the Gospel. In accordance with the Second Commandment, no pictorial representation of God was ever allowed in the Temple, Synagogues, or Early Christian Churches.

The situation gradually changed as Gentile Christians brought into the church their pagan beliefs and practices. Soon pictures, statues, and Passion Plays became common place. During the Middle Ages, Passion Plays were staged first in churches, then in church yards, and finally in special outdoor amphitheatres. Passion Plays have become important tourist attractions in different countries. The Oberammergau Passion Play in upper Bavaria, Germany, draws tourists every ten year from many parts of the

world. In America also there are popular Passion Plays in such places as Eureka Springs, Arkansas, Black Hills, South Dakota, and Lake Wales, Florida.

The Temptation to Worship a Visible Christ

At the time of the Reformation, Protestants overwhelmingly rejected the use of images, statues, relics, Passion Plays, as a violation of the Second Commandment. Rather than visual imagery, they relied on the preaching of the Word to save souls and the Gospel made significant advances.

I am not proposing the elimination of all pictures of Christ. Plain pictures of Christ can be a source of inspiration without becoming an object of worship. The problem arises when pictures are designed and used to portray and foster unbiblical teachings such as the devotion to Christ's Passion or to the Sacred Heart of Mary. In these instances pictures encourage an idolatrous form of worship.

The temptation to worship a visible and tangible Christ can be seen in dominant Catholic countries, where the only Christ devout Catholics know and worship is the One they touch, see, and often wear as jewelry. Statues, crucifixes, and pictures of the bleeding Savior abound in devout Catholic homes. Instead of worshipping the invisible Lord in Spirit and Truth, they worship an idol that they can see, touch, and feel.

The sad reality is that many Christians have become so conditioned by the entertainment industry, that playing God or with God through drama, pictures, movies, and rock music has become an accepted form of worship. By accepting these things and endorsing movies like *The Passion of the Christ*, we run the risk today of returning to the Medieval false worship which the Protestants struggled and died to reform.

DOES *THE PASSION* OFFER A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY FOR SPREADING THE GOSPEL?

Does *The Passion of the Christ* provide a unique opportunity for spreading the Gospel? This is the feeling of many evangelical leaders. "This is a window of opportunity we have. Here's a guy who's putting his money into a movie that has everything to do with what we do," said pastor Cory

Engel of Harvest Springs Community Church in Great Falls, Montana. 'Churches used to communicate by having a little lecture time on Sunday morning. People don't interact that way anymore. Here's a chance for us to use a modern-day technique to communicate the truth of the Bible,' the Rev. Engel said" ("Churches Make 'Stunning' Show of Support for Gibson's 'Passion,'" *Newsmax*, Thursday, Feb. 5, 2004).

It is true that we live in a highly visual and anti-literate society where people would rather watch a movie than read a book. But does this mean that we should replace preaching with movies or dramatic plays? We need to remember that during the Middle Ages, religious teachings were communicated by visual presentations such as Passion Plays, statues, icons, and relics. They took the place of the Bible, which the Catholic Church refused to have translated into the common languages of the people. These things were designed to stimulate an emotional response. The result was the gradual decadence of the church that sank into deep superstition.

The ability of images, statues, relics, and drama to evoke an emotional response does not guarantee an accurate transmission of the Gospel. They often lead to idolatry. In fact, religious souvenirs of *The Passion* are already for sale on websites. People can already buy reproduction of the nails or of the cross of *The Passion* and wear them as earrings, pendants, or necklaces. Devout Catholics wear what they worship and worship what they wear. This is why God ordained the communication of the Gospel through preaching, rather than through visual presentations like drama, Passions Plays, and imageries. The latter can lead to idolatry.

Drama options were readily available to the Apostles as they brought the Gospel to cities equipped with amphitheaters and actors trained to portray religious and moral themes to the people. But the Lord instructed the Apostles to proclaim the Good News of salvation through the medium of preaching: "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Tim. 4:2-4).

Does The Passion Provide a Unique Witnessing Opportunity?

Does *The Passion* provide a unique witnessing opportunity to those who view the movie? My answer is "YES." The fact that the movie shocks people with a brutal Catholic portrayal of Christ's Passion, offers a unique opportunity to help people appreciate the true and balanced biblical version of Christ's atoning sacrifice for our redemption.

We can help people understand that the relentless brutality of the beating and whipping and ripping of Christ's skin as shown in the movie, is foreign to the Gospels. It is inspired by Catholic mystical literature designed to promote the satisfaction of divine justice by the enormity of Christ's suffering and the the imitation of His suffering as a way of salvation.

We can explain to people that there are no gory details in the biblical accounts of Jesus' flogging and crucifixion. The Synoptic Gospels simply tell us: "Having scourged Jesus, [Pilate] delivered him to be crucified," . . . "And when they came to a place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him" (see Matt 27:26, 33; Mark 15:20, 22; Luke 23:25, 33). The reason for such brevity is because we are saved by Christ's perfect life and atoning death for our sins, and not by the intensity of His suffering.

More important still, we can point out that the prominent role of Mary in the movie is totally unbiblical. It is inspired by the Catholic belief that Mary is a partner with Christ in our salvation. In the Gospels' account of the Passion, Mary appears only once at the Cross when Christ entrusts her to the care of John, saying: "Woman, behold your son!" (John 19:26). Such an impersonal address hardly supports the Catholic view of Mary as co-redeemer of mankind.

Finally, we can share the Good News that we do not need to repeat Christ's sacrifice again and again as the Catholic priests do at the altar, in order to ensure our salvation, because "He did this once for all when he offered up himself" for our eternal salvation (Heb 7:27). We can experience every day the benefits of Christ's sacrifice because our Savior is working hard in the heavenly sanctuary to bring to consummation His redemptive mission on the glorious Day of His Return.

THE POTENTIAL OF *THE PASSION* FOR CATHOLIC EVANGELISM

The Catholic Church badly needed a boost to polish her image, which had been tarnished by sexual scandals. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* provides the much needed boost. The movie will prove to be a powerful evangelistic tool for the Catholic Church. Many Evangelical leaders support Mel Gibson, but they do not control him. He is under the grip of the Roman Catholic Church that he is serving as a true apostle. He may well prove to be the most influential Catholic evangelist of our times.

The *Daily Catholic* openly acknowledges the evangelistic role of Gibson, saying: "Many see Gibson as a Hollywood movie star, but True Catholics see him as an evangelist in the purist sense. A true Apostle for the Truths and Traditions of the Church Christ founded. Mel has set on film what has always been set in stone: the everlasting reminder of why Christ died for each and every one of us. We have that reminder daily in the Latin Mass in the Alter Christus—the priest offers Him up daily as a propitiatory sacrifice in an unbloody manner to the Father for us. Prayerfully this movie will move the hearts and souls of millions to return to the Truths and Traditions of Christ's True Church (*Daily Catholic*, January 17, 2004; emphasis added).

It is not surprising that the international magazine *Inside the Vatican* has chosen Mel Gibson as its "Man of the Year" for 2003. Why Not? The millions of non-Catholics that are viewing *The Passion* in many countries will be introduced in a compelling way to the Catholic faith of its producer, Mel Gibson. In an interview with CHRISTIANITY TODAY, Gibson himself acknowledges his surprise at how evangelicals are endorsing the film, in spite of its exaltation of Mary. He says: "I've been actually amazed at the way I would say the evangelical audience has responded to this film more than any other Christian group. For me the amazing thing is that the film is so *Marian* [focused on Mary]. But I think the way the film displays her has been kind of an eye opener for evangelicals who don't usually look at that aspect. They understand the reality of a mother and a son." (*Christianity Today*, 2/23/04).

Gibson himself is amazed at how evangelicals are buying into Catholic Mariolatry. We have predicted this development of the bridging of the gulf

and clasping of the hand for a century, and now that is happening we do not seem to recognize it.

Evangelical leaders who are enthusiastically promoting *The Passion* may not realize that the ultimate beneficiary is the Catholic Church. Those who like the film may be attracted to Gibson's Catholic faith, reflected throughout the film. A century ago, Ellen White warned that "The Protestant of the United States will be foremost in stretching the hands across the gulf to grasp the hand of spiritualism; they will reach over the abyss to clasp hands with the Roman power" (*Great Controversy*, p. 588). The clasping of hands between Catholicism and Protestantism is taking place in many ways today. The mutual endorsement and promotion of *The Passion*—a powerful portrayal of the Catholic view of Christ's sacrifice—serves as a compelling reminder that the gulf is being bridged and hands are being clasped, and the Protestants are being drawn into the Catholic web.

OUR CONCERN FOR MEL GIBSON

In closing, I wish to share the concern for Mel Gibson expressed by Prof. Paul Pichot, President of the newly establish French-Speaking Adventist University in Africa. He closes his lengthy message, saying: "My concern-- is for Mel Gibson, a poor, lost, deluded soul. Who among us will reach out to him and pull him out of this foul spiritual spider web in which he is entangled? He does not know any better. He happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. He needs to see, to hear, to touch, the truth, but who will reach out to him? Who will be concerned enough to point him to the real Jesus, the Messiah, the Lover and Saviour of the world? Will it be an Adventist colporter? Who will place into his trembling hand the beautiful book, *The Desire of Ages*, so that he may know God, and Jesus Whom He has sent? Instead of condemning him, may we find ways to reach out to him, and pull him out of the spiritual quagmire in which he is sinking right now. May that be our main concern."

Indeed, may this be the concern of each one of us, to reach out to Gibson and to million of sincere people like him who are blinded by Catholic superstitious beliefs. May God give us the wisdom and grace to share with them the Good News that the Divine Son of God took upon Himself our human nature, lived a perfect life, died as the perfect sacrifice for our sins, is ministering in the heavenly sanctuary on our behalf, and will soon Return to bring to consummation His redemptive mission.